

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Bar Balto

Faiza Guene

About the Book

Bar Balto is a whodunit set in Making-Ends-Meet, a dead end town too far from Paris. Joël, AKA 'The Rink' (because he's so bald you could skate on it), the unpopular owner of the only bar in town, has been murdered. When he is found, stark naked, punctured with multiple stab wounds and surrounded by rivers of blood, it's not so much a question of who did kill him as who didn't. His customers have plenty of motives...

In a series of riveting monologues, the locals tell us their stories of what they did on the night of the murder. There's Magalie, the teenage girl obsessed with Paris Hilton who talks in text-speak; Tani, her boyfriend, a troublemaker who has dropped out of college; Madame Yéva, his mother, who has to endure Joël's lecherous gaze when she buys her fags at the bar; Jacko, her unemployed, gambling, daytime-TV addicted husband; Yeznig, their younger son, who has learning difficulties but perfect memory recall; and newcomers Ali and Nadia, the Muslim twins from Marseille, who are struggling to fit in. As the tension mounts and we're still none the wiser, the ending - in the form of Joël's macabre, posthumous confession - is as tragic as it is unexpected.

Faiza Guene flexes her signature wit, ear for real voices and commitment to 'ordinary lives', giving us the human tales that lie behind unthinking, everyday prejudice and racism. Bar Balto is a rollicking murder-mystery set in the gritty here and now.

BAR BALTO

Faïza Guène

Translated from the French by Sarah Ardizzone

Chatto & Windus
LONDON

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Joël, aka Jojo, aka The Rink

Glossary

Translator's Thanks

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BY THE SAME AUTHOR
Just Like Tomorrow
Dreams from the Endz

Joël, aka Jojo, aka the Rink

It's Joël Morvier to you, and I've decided to tell this story in my own words. Thirty years I've been surrounded by newspapers, so there's no pulling the wool over my eyes. I can see how they twist the facts. Rather trust my own mouth.

I'd have turned sixty-two in April, twelfth of the month. I'm telling you that as a point of fact. I've never celebrated a birthday in my life.

They say I'm not an easy man to like. I'd say I didn't get as much love and sympathy as I deserved. As for the slurs, I'm no racist. I've just got values, and clearly that bothers some people.

I'm exactly as nature's factory turned me out. I've heard it said I'm the unfeeling sort, but there weren't many choices to start with. Still, nothing ever kept this car off the road. Made in France, I might add.

The way they go on, you'd think we had to get upset about every kid out there who's ever been raped.

I see the images on TV like everyone else: the bombings, the accidents, the hurricanes and those old fogeys dying from the heat. Nothing doing. They don't affect me.

I lost my dad when I was quite young. But it's not like I'm the only one. Dads, they've all got to die some day. I'm not saying this for the sympathy trip, I'm just explaining.

So I lived with my Uncle Louis in the place over the bar for a few years. Then he went and snuffed it too. Cancer.

My old man's death was as stupid as his life. Hunting accident. Mind you, everything was an accident with him, including me.

Our family's lived in Making-Ends-Meet for over fifty years now. It's got a population of about four and a half thousand, and it's stuck on the end of an RER line. Somewhere you'll never set foot.

Everybody round here knows me: Jojo, or 'the Rink' for the regulars. That's my nickname, supposedly because my bald patch is shiny enough to skate on. Still, it only happened recently - you should've seen my mop as a teenager. From behind, I looked like Dalida. I keep my hair long for the memories, even though there's this wasteland on top. I was the owner of Bar Balto. And yes, I know, you'll find Baltos all over France; let's just say we didn't rack our brains for the name. It's the local bar-tobacconist-newsagent's. The village lung. And vomit bag.

For years I've played the on-hand shrink. Spent whole evenings listening to them whingeing on about their shitty problems and dishing out their dirty jokes. My bar would make a mental-health ward look like a tea room. I used to try raising the level of conversation, but it never got any higher than the dole.

Each time I turned to my left I'd see Claudine, leaning on the bar, always in the same place. She spends so much time in that spot you don't notice her after a while. Everyone round here calls her the Black Widow. Word is she poisoned her husband a few weeks after they got married. Laced his pumpkin soup with insecticide. Whenever she's had one too many, she's got a thing for taking her clothes off - starting with her tights. I'll spare you the details.

Someone who felt sick at the sight was Yves Soninlaw, the son-in-law of the Mayor of Making. I'm not pulling your

leg, that's his name, Soninlaw. He confided in me once that he'd never backed his father-in-law; just couldn't take standing in his shadow. I was the only person who knew that Soninlaw voted Commie.

One day, early last summer, he got me to order in a bodybuilding magazine, on subscription. You know the sort, for fitness freaks, whole pages of protein ads, the kind you'd use for beefing up prize cattle. Photos of tanned lads with big muscles and oil all over them. Soninlaw was hooked in no time. Couldn't get enough of them. I didn't want to know the rest. Just thought, there goes another poof.

My highlight of the day used to be around seven o'clock, when Madame Yéva dropped in to buy her Gauloises Blondes. Blow me, she's well stacked. No two ways about it, she's a good-looking woman. Always leaving this waft of perfume behind her, like a big pink cloud, a cloud of love. The sweetest scent that makes time stand still at the bar. Now, I don't want to get sappy here, but Madame Yéva is something else. The kind of woman who makes you feel inspired. Once or twice, I even put my hand on her bum - nice and subtle, mind. She took it badly. I made out I didn't do it on purpose, but she kicked up one hell of a fuss. Screaming in my face, calling me every name under the sun, and all the time I was just thinking how sexy she looked when she got feisty. She lives with three men and they're all as bad each other. Two sons: trouble in a baseball cap, and a mongol. Plus a husband in a shell suit who's addicted to the lottery. I reckon she must stay with him because of what he can do in the sack. Even so, it takes some imagining.

My Yéva's the only thing I'll miss.

I'm lying in a pool of my own blood here, starkers; you wouldn't believe the position I'm in. I was expecting to see